DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 207 UD 030 102

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TITLE Schoolcentrism: A Barrier to Success for At-Risk Youngsters.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Classroom Environment; *Community Influence; *Cultural Pluralism; Economically Disadvantaged; Elementary Secondary Education; *High Risk Students; *Low Income Groups; Minority Groups; Rural to Urban Migration; *School Community Relationship; Teacher Role; Urban Environment; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Diversity (Student)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the lack of familiarity that teachers and administrators have with the communities in which low-income students live and stresses the need to create linkages between the school and the outside world to help at-risk students succeed academically. There is a serious flaw in most community-oriented approaches and many contemporary efforts are limited because they are derived from an exclusively school-focused perspective and thus represent "schoolcentric" thinking. Several situations are presented that depict common, well-meaning attempts of educators to consider the community and its relationship to schooling. The schoolcentric character of these efforts is discussed. The pattern of schoolcentrism is endemic and the ultimate solution is to change the paradigms in which the child is redefined in terms of his or her dual socialization within two valid systems: the community and the school. Such a change requires a recognition of the competencies and talents that the culturally divergent child brings into the school and a realization that the child's primary relationships outside the school have educational relevance. (GLR)

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SCHOOLCENTRISM: A BARRIER TO SUCCESS FOR AT-RISK YOUNGSTERS

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SCHOOLCENTRISM: A BARRIER TO SUCCESS FOR AT-RISK YOUNGSTERS

Following our shift from a rural to an urban society, the American schools have become decontextualized and separated from the communities of their students. Whereas in earlier times, school teachers and administrators usually lived in the same communities as their students, today, especially in the case of low-income neighborhood schools, they usually commute and spend very little if any time in the child's non-school world. This has led to the development of a mode of schoolcentric thinking in which the child's external world is misunderstood, with serious consequences.

We are beginning to understand the need for linkages between the school and the world outside. Current education policy, public interest, and professional strategies are aimed at increasing parent and community involvement in the schooling process. The need to develop successful links between the schools and the community is well-established (Arvizu, 1992; Decker & Romney, 1992; Clarke-Stewart, 1983; Richardson Foundation Forum). In fact, successful links are expected to contribute to the solution of some rather formidable educational problems such as truancy, pregnancy, and low

literacy rates. It seems appropriate that school-community relations are now prioritized in school budgets, goals, and activities.

There is a serious flaw in most community-oriented approaches. Many contemporary efforts are limited because they derive from an exclusively school-focused perspective -- they represent schoolcentric thinking.

The following scenarios depict the common, "benevolent", well-meaning attempts of educators to consider the community and its relationship to schooling. The schoolcentric character of these will be discussed in "Beyond Schoolcentrism" below.

A superintendent of schools, frustrated by persistent low scores of at-risk students, forms a task force of community leaders to develop a strategy. The task force consists of a hospital administrator, a university president, a petrochemical company CEO, a bank vice president, a Chamber of Commerce representative, the president of a local teachers organization and leaders of two ethnic organizations.

Scenario One: The Superintendent's Task Force

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An elementary school principal develops an incentive program to get parents to attend PTA meetings. She sends notices home to parents encouraging them to attend the next meeting and specifying the date and time. At the next meeting, the PTA president asks the parents of the children in each classroom to stand so that one of the PTA officers can count them. The classroom with the largest number of parents present gets a plaque and the principal commends its students for being the "Number One Parent Class." Students from that class are allowed to line up first for lunch at the cafeteria until the next PTA meeting.

Scenario Two: A Principal's Attempt to Increase PTA Participation

A teacher who has tried a number of methods to get students involved in reading and language activities finds them to be resistant. Some are almost belligerent. Others just seem non-responsive. Seeking both an explanation and support, he turns to a colleague in the teachers' lounge and says, "You know, given the lack of language in the home, it's rather pointless to expect us to teach these kids on grade level. There's just no way that's going to happen."

Scenario Three: A Teacher Who Believes His Students Are Culturally Deprived

An Hispanic bilingual teacher who has been teaching linguistically-diverse children for several years concludes that most of her students are less verbal, take less initiative, are less self-assured and are less intelligent than other students in the school.

Scenario Four: An Hispanic Teacher's Perceptions

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A school counselor gets administrative support to conduct an in-service for parents of at-risk students. He assumes that the children lack basic needs such as proper nutrition, nurturing home environments and adequate self-esteem within the family.

Scenario Five: A Counselor's Perception of Deficiencies Within Families

Schoolcentrism Defined

The above illustrate attempts on the part of school personnel to understand and resolve some persistent concerns. However well-intentioned, the plans are conceived in the naive belief that the school is at the center of the child's life. They emanate from a paradigm located within the culture of professional education. Even though educators often use the cliche, "teach the whole child," they measure youngsters against school-related standards, as though their community and family lives were subordinate to, separate from, or inimical to school standards.

Solutions to the identified problems are products of that same thinking. Looking at diverse youngsters in this light is logical, understandable and, often, a prescription for continued failure.

The concept "schoolcentrism" derives from that of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism, or culture-centeredness,

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is the tendency to judge others by the standards of one's own culture (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). Anthropologists generally regard this as inappropriate since it produces a biased interpretation of other people's behavior. As with ethnocentrism a certain amount of schoolcentrism is probably inevitable. But schoolcentrism is something that professionals need to be concerned about. It leads to patterns of thinking in which students and their families are treated patronizingly and are regarded pathologically. Thus there is a temptation to view some groups as bearing the primary or exclusive cause of youngsters' school problems. Deficiency becomes the lens through which the child and his/her community is defined.

In addition to producing negative biases in which well-intentioned professionals underestimate, misplan and offend the child's community, schoolcentric thinking prevents development of creative alternatives and practical solutions. The principal loss is the failure to establish healthy, supportive partnerships with the community.

Furthermore, the typical parameters of those partnerships are narrowly constructed. Most of the community/parent involvement programs focus their efforts in one or more of the following five areas: the school's responsibility to communicate with parents; the school's capacity to train parents in parenting skills, school

policy, and the like; parental involvement in the schools as tutors or aides; parental involvement in governance and advocacy groups (for example, by serving on campus advisory committees); and the parent's potential to help students with homework and support school activities (for example sports, music, or parent-teacher organizational activities). Beyond these, school officials identify their districts as community-focused if they allow parents to choose which school their child will attend.

Such efforts are helpful but they are one-dimensional approaches. They greatly underestimate the capacity of people from the child's community to work as co-equal partners with schools. A true partnership is possible here when all participants recognize the expertise and the unique capacities of all other partners. The expertise of the community is the under-rated component in this relationship.

Community people have experience with the entire range of cultural and ethnic variables affecting youngsters' development, including school performance. Often they know or can obtain vitally important information that is both educationally significant and outside the view of school authorities. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- perceptions of community about the attitudes of teachers and school authorities toward their children;

- economic factors that might prevent parental involvement with children's school-related activities;
- levels of literacy among adults in the community;
- non-verbal characteristics employed in formal and informal settings and acquired by children (for example, in listening behavior);
- linguistic styles reinforced in the community that may diverge from those expected by schools (for example, in the use of turn-taking cues);
- values that may reinforce and/or diverge from those assumed by school authorities (for example, the emphasis of long-term goals over short-term ones); and
- the amount and level of reading reinforced in home environments.

Beyond Schoolcentrism

As the children's communities assume a more prominent role in our analysis of educational activities, the schoolcentric nature of those activities is exposed. Let us take a look at the initial examples from the perspective of the community---the community in which the

child lives.

Scenario One: The Superintendent's Task Force

The best way to find out about the children's environments is to examine them directly. A task force composed mostly of people with few or no credentials in the child's community cannot be expected to develop solutions other than to provide a veneer of support for the administration. It is not only that they do not understand the specific dynamics of the child's community but also they often will not even have access to it. Moreover, they will usually not have much incentive to conduct the community-level investigation that would really get at the root of the issues the school is facing. Thus, such a group won't solve underlying challenges. However, people from the child's community know far more than they about resources that can be marshalled or home environments that may not be conducive to formal learning. They can assist the school in, for example, finding prospective mentors to play a positive role in a child's life.

Scenario Two: A Principal's Attempt To Increase PTA Participation

Parents from some communities do not appear at the school despite serious efforts by teachers and

administrators to get them there. Usually the reasons are logical and have nothing to do with lack of love or insufficient motivation to help their children. Among the reasons are:

- they need to work and the job conflicts with school meeting times;
- they have family responsibilities and no one to take over on these even for brief times;
- they are ashamed to show up at school because their clothes and appearance reflect poverty and they feel degraded;
- they feel that educators talk down to them;
- they are intimidated by the language of school personnel and often fail to understand the messages being given; and
- they feel that suggestions educators give them for working with their children are out of line with the reality of their lives.

"Incentives" such as those in the example are often counterproductive. While a few students may feel reinforced for encouraging their parents to come to school, many more students feel punished. They are likely to experience the sting of embarrassment because their parents did not show up. The reasons behind their parents' absence (e.g., that their parents were ashamed

of their impoverished appearance) may increase the humiliation. In this type of situation, the principal set up a condition in which schools are sending negative messages to children about their parents. This is a destructive condition personally and pedagogically. Children could suffer from school-sanctioned peer pressures and embarrassment. We might imagine how we would feel if our parents' absence resulted in our class's loss of the above honors. Such humiliations may be large or small. But each one represents a possible generalization of effect in which the incentive to succeed in school is reduced.

Scenario Three: A Teacher Who Believes His Students Are Culturally Deprived

We can no longer afford to regard diverse populations pathologically. The notion of cultural deprivation has long ago been shown to be seriously flawed although it remains a popular option among educators. The children are not linguistically deprived and inferences that suggest so are naive. Such inferences reflect a lack of understanding of language acquisition and of the real linguistic dynamics of the home environment. In his seminal research, William Labov (1972) contended that although African-American children speak a nonstandard form of English, their language is

structurally sound. The children used their language to express complex, symbolic, and higher order thinking. He concluded that the nonstandard dialect spoken by the children is not deficient in linguistic terms.

Scenario Four: An Hispanic Teacher's Perceptions

Some years ago, researchers discovered that teachers from the same ethnically-diverse backgrounds as their at-risk students often have the same negative perceptions of their pupils' abilities as do other teachers (Figueroa & Gallegos, 1972). Figueroa and Gallegos found that Hispanic bilingual teachers tend to regard their Hispanic students as less verbal, less likely to take initiative and less intelligent. Further, an African-American middle school teacher found that sharing an ethnic background is not enough to ensure success for her African-American students (Sims, 1992). She wrote, "...[H]aving never considered myself outside the community of my students, I was faced with a situation that compelled me to question whether being black and raised in a poor, urban community automatically bestowed upon me the status of being 'one' with my students, or whether this assumption was a deliberate effort on my part to sustain my previous links to my African-American community (Sims 1992, p. 344)." Sims acknowledged that she does not always speak the same language or interpret

situations the same as her black students. She proposed that teachers, regardless of ethnicity, need to become researchers of their students, a profession of inquirers. While it is sometimes believed that simply the presence of ethnically-diverse professional staff in the classroom itself addresses the needs of students, it is clear that schoolcentric thinking exists across ethnic groups within the education profession.

Scenario Five: A Counselor's Perceptions of Deficiencies Within Families

Children from economically disadvantaged homes suffer primarily from poverty itself. There is little evidence that they suffer any less love or that their parents are incompetent as parents. Unfortunately, poor people also have to suffer the indignity of prejudices against them. One manifestation is the perception of ineptness. Another is the belief that poor youngsters necessarily suffer from low self esteem and that raising it will lead to higher academic performance.

A major study in the 1970s (Rosenburg and Simmons 1972), which has been replicated a number of times found that children from inner-city, low-income backgrounds often have higher self esteem than do youngsters from more affluent suburbs. While many families at each economic level these days could use some direction in

terms of developing nutritional habits, poor families usually produce very nutritious meals with the limited resources they have. And there is simply no evidence that economically disadvantaged parents are less willing or less able to provide strong emotional support for their children.

Many professional educators plan programs specifically aimed at increasing the self esteem of culturally-different students because they assume that such deficiencies in esteem exist. Based on conventional wisdom within the profession, teachers are more likely to believe that low self esteem is a significant cause of poor academic performance among culturally-different students. However, researchers have consistently found that black students score higher on self esteem measures than white students in the same schools (Lay & Wakstein, 1989; Cooley et al., 1991; Tashakkori, 1991; Howerton et al.,1992; Ryujin & Abita, 1992). Our analysis of these scenarios calls attention to the comprehensive nature of the schoolcentric paradigm as well as the potential for responding outside that framework. Once community representatives, including parents and other potential support people, are linked to the school effort in a new way, many possibilities emerge. The following are a few examples illustrating positive community-school activities that are non-schoolcentric:

- a community expert provides an inservice for teachers and counselors on the non-verbal patterns of showing respect and disrespect for authority that are followed within the community;
- a retired teacher from the community agrees to tutor a small group of children from the neighborhood 3 afternoons a week;
- a community educational support group is formed to identify families with special needs and to provide the school with educationally relevant background information;
- a high school student agrees to mentor a younger child from a single-parent household with few resources;
- a small group of parents agrees to visit the homes of some children to identify the need for high-interest reading materials in the homes and to encourage literacy in all the family members;
- A panel of community experts, including people from the neighborhoods and an ethnographically-trained teacher meet with teachers to present the primary discourse patterns in which the children are schooled within the community; and

- a team of teachers and community people investigate and define alleged teacher bias and alleged lower teacher expectations.

These types of activity provide useful information for inservicing teachers and for guiding teacher-parent relationships. They also create productive support for the schooling effort.

The missing link in the education of at-risk children is the child's community. If educators are going to address learners' needs realistically, they will have to learn to appreciate and understand the productive potential of the community. They will have to become students of their students and that means seeing beyond the poverty and beyond the schoolcentric theories that tend to dominate their training. It also means that we must avoid creating negative judgments that end up guiding some of our present "solutions" and that prevent us from seeing the countless possibilities for helping children who are depending on us.

What is the cure for schoolcentrism?

The pattern of schoolcentric thinking is endemic. School leaders including teachers, school board members, administrators, and counselors are predisposed to it. They are pressed into a we/they pattern in their teacher

preparation courses in which the concepts (e.g., "at-risk", "diverse populations") are presented as challenges to their own professional success. Once they take their place in schools, they adapt to the culture, not of the school in its entirety, but of the professionals who have strongly-held views of "those kids" and "their families" and "the community." It is natural, then, as teachers become inducted into their profession, that they adopt a schoolcentric perspective.

The ultimate solution is a change of paradigms in which the child is redefined in terms of his/her dual socialization within two valid systems: the community and the school. Such a change would require recognition of the hitherto unnoticed competencies and talents that the culturally-divergent child brings into the school. It would also involve a recognition that his/her primary relationships outside the school have educational relevance. It is the expertise within the community which, linked with that of professional educators, would create an understanding of strategies for helping youngsters. This would be an expertise amplified in the sharing of knowledge in the two primary realms in which the children are being socialized.

The change of paradigms in this instance is likely to take place once educators accept their own notion of the whole child and understand that the child enters the

school each day with a range of culturally-relevant competencies and comes from a community that strongly--and positively--influences him/her every day. The paradigm shift is likely to occur once new partnerships are forged between the school and the neighborhoods and once those partnerships involve a reciprocal respect for the expertise of these two primary sectors of the child's life.